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Getting Rid of Kaddafi

Reagan's policy raises some troubling questions

Ronald Reagan has now made it plain what his Libya policy is: to get rid of Muammar Kaddafi. As Secretary of State George Shultz explained last week, the president's hope was that Operation El Dorado Canyon would encourage Libyan officers to overthrow their leader. "If a coup takes place," Shultz said, "that's all to the good." While denying any intention to kill Kaddafi, the president's men also admit they targeted his barracks with "a reasonable expectation that he might be there." This time the colonel survived. What about next time? "The more of his places we hit at once, the better the odds," said one Reagan strategist. The odds of what? he was asked. "You can guess," he replied. "That's all I have to say."

Although Reagan's critics attack his policy as Ramboite muscle flexing, it does have a logic. His advisers don't pretend that eliminating Kaddafi will get rid of terrorism. But they do believe it will stop Libya's troublemaking. "The problem is Kaddafi, not Libya," says one top U.S. official. The president's strategists also concede their approach is not ideal—but they maintain that it is the best one available. Ignoring Kaddafi hasn't worked, they argue. Trying to reason with him has failed too. Attempting to assassinate him would be illegal (page 21). And organizing sanctions has proved either impossible or ineffective. With all other possibilities blocked, administration hands say, they decided months ago that military pressure was the only choice left. "The debate about options," says one senior official, "ended late last year."

Reagan's men also acknowledge that their approach carries risks. After the raid one State Department official predicted that "there could be a short-term swarm of activity designed to make it appear that U.S. policy can't pay." The shooting of an American Embassy employee in Khartoum, the grenade blast near the U.S. Consulate in Costa Rica and the slaying of American hostage Peter Kilburn and two British captives in Beirut proved him trag-

ically right. Over the long run, however, some presidential advisers predict their get-tough decision will deter Libyan and other terrorists. And all insist that Reagan had to do something in response to Kaddafi's war on Americans. "The U.S. has to concentrate on doing what's right," says one administration official, "not on what Kaddafi might do wrong."

But Reagan's advisers only defend his policy; they don't guarantee it will work. It is still unclear where the president's fight to the finish with Kaddafi will end.

How high will the costs run? Over time, how will it play with the American people, the Soviets and the rest of Washington's friends and enemies around the world? The answers are far from evident, but the questions are clear and pressing:

How Far Will Reagan Go?

U.S. officials say they don't intend to get into a tit-for-tat war of escalation with Kaddafi. If he is caught planning another major attack on Americans, they vow to turn up the heat "dramatically." Washington plans to keep U.S. naval forces off the Libyan coast. For now, they will probe Kaddafi's air defenses and "tickle" his radar with electronically generated false images; but they will also be poised for another assault. Reagan's military planners are reviewing targets for a second strike inside Libya. Among the options: anti-aircraft missile and radar sites, communications centers, parking lots for jets and tanks, military storage areas, oil-pumping and loading facilities and suspected terrorist training camps. Washington has also not ruled out an attack on Kaddafi's desert hideout in Sabha, where he reportedly retreated after last week's raid.

Reagan's advisers want to step up pressure on other fronts as well. At the upcoming economic summit of the major Western leaders in Tokyo, Reagan will keep pressing the allies to join in tougher economic,

political and intelligence action against Libya. In particular, senior U.S. officials will continue to ask the Europeans to close down Libya's People's Bureaus, arguing that Kaddafi uses these embassies to organize terrorism. Several U.S. and European analysts point out other

screws the allies could turn. They could limit travel rights for Libyan citizens. They could refuse to import Libyan oil or to accept deliveries from refineries that process Libyan crude. They could impose a naval quarantine that would make it hard for Kaddafi to get oil out of the country or to get food and other imports in.

Still, the campaign won't be as easy as it sounds. The president continues to insist on three prerequisites for U.S. military action: it must be directed at targets with a connection to terrorism, pose minimal danger to civilians and involve an acceptably low risk to U.S. servicemen. It will be difficult to meet those conditions and still hit Kaddafi harder. The next time Reagan may not have the use of Britain's airfields or the F-111s based there; that would complicate the logistics of a larger attack. If the president wants to continue invoking the principle of "self-defense" under international law, he must meet two more requirements: to offer proof of planned aggression and to keep attacks "proportionate" to threats. On economic sanctions, a successful policy would have to be cooperative; but it remains unlikely that Washington can get the allies to agree on one strategy.

It is also unclear how high a price Reagan would be willing to pay. According to one of his intimates, the president was upset when U.S. intelligence indicated that the

raid on Tripoli had killed one of Kaddafi's children. "The one thing that gets to him is carnage," the source says. But there could be a lot more bloodshed before the war with Kaddafi is over. The counterstrikes in Khartoum and Beirut show that free-lance terrorists are still at work. While U.S. intelligence finds little evidence that Kaddafi has planned new outrages since the raid, it cites ample evidence that he had previously organized dozens of plots against U.S. personnel and facilities. Those administration officials who argue that military strikes will curb terrorism over the long run may turn out to be right. But the example of the Israelis, for one, doesn't bode well. For two decades they have attacked PLO targets; but they still aren't free from Palestinian terrorism.

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Overthrow Kaddafi?

Reagan's policy is based on the premise that increased U.S. pressure will embolden Kaddafi's enemies to rise against him. Shultz said last week, "We know there are lots of people in Libya who think it would be a better place without Colonel Kaddafi." CIA analysts have long held that many Libyan officers oppose Kad-

dafi's adventurism in Chad and elsewhere. They also think the military resents Kaddafi's "revolutionary guards"—paramilitary units that man Army posts and are eventually supposed to replace the regular Army entirely. The CIA says Kaddafi has survived 19 coup attempts since he took power in 1969 and at least three assassination plots in the past two years. In addition, the agency has predicted another coup attempt this year, with or without American pressure. Other U.S. officials maintain that Kaddafi's eccentric mixture of Islamic fundamentalism, pan-Arabism and personality cult has alienated much of the middle class, as well as religious leaders and farmers. Recently, they add, Libya's falling oil revenues and growing consumer shortages have fed popular discontent.

While trying to make Libyans think twice about the price of Kaddafi's leadership, CIA analysts also hope to rattle the colonel himself. They believe he is a megalomaniac who has trouble tolerating failure and has shown signs of midlife crisis and depression. They say Kaddafi's moodiness may explain why he sounded incoherent when he talked with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd after the Gulf of Sidra skirmish. If Washington can keep harassing Kaddafi with military action and psychological warfare, the analysts argue, he may come unhinged—making it both easier and more tempting for his foes to move against him.

Not everyone shares the CIA's assessment of Kaddafi's vulnerability. Israeli intelligence believes the Libyan military is still firmly behind him. Libyan specialist Lisa Anderson of Columbia University argues that Reagan's approach only enhances support for Kaddafi and makes dissidents afraid of looking like "American puppets." The skeptics maintain that Kaddafi has purged most of his rivals within the military and used his East German-trained intelligence service to keep close watch on potential coup makers. His reported practice of rarely spending two nights in the same place also makes Kaddafi a difficult target, they point out. As for his personal-

ity, the doubters see signs of tenacity as well as mood swings: they believe Kaddafi and his supporters may be willing to endure far greater hardships in their quest for revolutionary martyrdom.

It is also uncertain whether the alternative to Kaddafi would be better. "It's hard to imagine that we could end up with anybody worse," Shultz said. But it is not unthinkable. Moderate Libyan opposition figures do exist. But most live in exile and have little influence inside the country; they are also divided among themselves. Some U.S. officials believe the Soviets covet a stronger foothold in Libya, which lies opposite several key NATO facilities. They fear that if Kaddafi appears in danger of

falling, Moscow may try to dump him in favor of a more reliable ally. One candidate is Kaddafi's second-in-command, Maj. Abdel Salam Jallud—a man the CIA describes as both ambitious and pro-Soviet.

Will Americans Stay the Course?

Early polls show overwhelmingly popular enthusiasm for the president's decision to punish Kaddafi and, publicly, administration officials are confident that support will hold up. They say Congress and the American public understand that the problem is serious, that it can't be solved overnight or without cost and that Reagan tried everything else before resorting to force. "We are beyond the point where we have to produce courtroom materials on Kaddafi," says one senior official.

But privately, some of Reagan's political advisers are less optimistic. They point out that the president has been lucky with military action in the past: either he has enjoyed quick success (Grenada, the Achille Lauro episode, the Gulf of Sidra), or he has known when to cut his losses (the Lebanon withdrawal). But the strategists are far from sure that Americans will stick behind a battle that is long, costly and likely under the best of circumstances to make only a dent in the scourge of terrorism. Former national-security adviser Robert MacFarlane worries that the president has not done enough to lay the political groundwork for his campaign—and that if the results fail to meet public expectations, it could hamper his ability to muster congressional and public support on other issues. "Right now," MacFarlane says, "I see sort of an emotionally driven bent to action without thinking through where it will

lead. But if you act on one item on your agenda and fail, that affects your ability to control the other items on your agenda."

How Will U.S. Friends and Foes React?

Allied reaction to Reagan's policy has been decidedly mixed (page 34). Does that matter? In a limited sense, no: the administration can continue its military campaign against Kaddafi without

European support. But U.S. officials admit that allied help would make the policy much easier and more effective. The trouble is that the handling of the raid may have complicated prospects for cooperation. Paul Jabber, a Mideast analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, points out that Reagan decided to call in the bombers just as the Europeans had finally started to take tougher diplomatic measures against Libya. The move, he says, "was a slap in the face to them at a time when they had started to move in the direction we want." The raid may also affect America's ability to use Europe as a staging area for future attacks on Libya. Jabber thinks it will complicate negotiations on the status of U.S. bases in Spain—and possibly Britain as well.

In the Mideast it's become a commonplace that moderate Arabs publicly rally around Kaddafi—but privately support America's attempts to undermine him. But the fight against Libya still has serious implications for Washington's standing in the region. Attacking Kaddafi feeds anti-Americanism and makes it look like Washington has abandoned its traditional role of broker between the Arabs and the Israelis. That makes it harder for moderates like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Hussein to join Washington in diplomatic efforts without being branded as lackeys. As long as the peace process languishes—a problem that, to be fair, also stems from Arab disunity—the Soviets have more room to increase their influence. "America cannot afford to take clear sides in the Middle East and leave the rest to the U.S.S.R.," argues Dr. Helmut Hubel of the German Society for Foreign Affairs.

Reagan's advisers predict his policy will have a limited impact on U.S.-Soviet relations. They argue that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has strong economic and political reasons for wanting better ties and progress on arms control. For that reason they expect him to continue talking in Geneva and eventually to agree to a second

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summit with Reagan. They also predict that Soviet willingness to fund and arm Kaddafi will be limited, especially since Libya's falling oil revenues make it more difficult for the Libyans to pay for weapons in the hard currency Moscow needs.

But those calculations could prove wrong. Some U.S. officials and Western diplomats in Washington worry that Moscow may surprise the administration by standing by Kaddafi. They stress that Gorbachev has already stepped up Soviet support for Tripoli once—by supplying it with SAM-5 missiles last year. They also speculate that the Soviets could use the Libyan crisis as an excuse for further stalling on the summit—a ploy to increase allied pressure on Washington to make new concessions on arms control. On the propaganda front, Reagan's policy gives Gorbachev a chance to condemn Americans as "imperialists" to the Third World, to exploit cracks within the alliance—and to paint himself as a man of peace.

Will Hitting Libya Curb Terrorism?

When debating whether bombing Libya will stop terrorism, Reagan officials pose another question: what would happen if Kaddafi were left unpunished? They argue he would feel free to activate dozens of plots against Americans that, according to the CIA, he has hatched around the world (Newsweek, April 21, 1986). They also dispute the view that Kaddafi has increased his troublemaking in response to U.S. actions or that Washington could deter him more effectively by addressing "root causes" such as the Palestinian problem. Kaddafi only uses American pressure and regional problems, they maintain, as an excuse for his politics of mayhem. As a result, says one top official, the administration has decided that "the demise of Kaddafi is an end in itself."

The danger is that singling out Kaddafi may make it tougher to fight other terrorists. It absorbs energy that might otherwise be used for guarding embassies and airlines, gathering intelligence and taking other preventive measures. It also incites the kind of terrorists who don't have an address. Reagan's team is hoping its approach will deter terrorist sponsors in Syria and Iran. But even in that unlikely event, Damascus and Teheran have only limited control over the sort of fanatics who killed Peter Kilburn. The fact that Syrian

President Hafez Assad has been unable to win the release of the remaining American and European hostages in Lebanon is proof of the point.

Reagan's iron-fist approach also fosters the impression that military force is the best strategy for coping with terrorism. It isn't. John Damis, a visiting professor at Harvard University, points out that terrorism doesn't require air bases or radar towers to operate. All it needs, he says, are "explosives, money, individuals who are willing to carry out missions, militant opposition to the United States and a diplomatic setup which allows weapons to cross borders freely in diplomatic pouches." Striking the Shiite terrorists in the Bekaa Valley would be far more difficult than hitting Kaddafi; they are too scattered and well hidden among the local population. Raids on Syria or Iran would also be problematic. Unlike Libya's targets, their primary military positions lie inland and are much harder to reach with any degree of safety or surprise. Both countries are better equipped to strike back. And attacking either of them would carry a much higher risk of provoking the Soviet Union.

During the buildup to Reagan's showdown with Kaddafi, the president and his aides weighed most of these questions. They obviously decided that targeting Libya was worth the risks. "We've made a decision to impose costs directly on Kaddafi," says one top official. "We don't want to keep escalating, but we're committed." Operation El Dorado Canyon made it clear how committed the administration is. Now it can only wait for the next round—and hope that the costs don't rise too high.

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